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OF DRAGONS

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PERSEUS: or Of Dragons

By H. F. Scott Stokes

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PERSEUS
OR
OF DRAGONS

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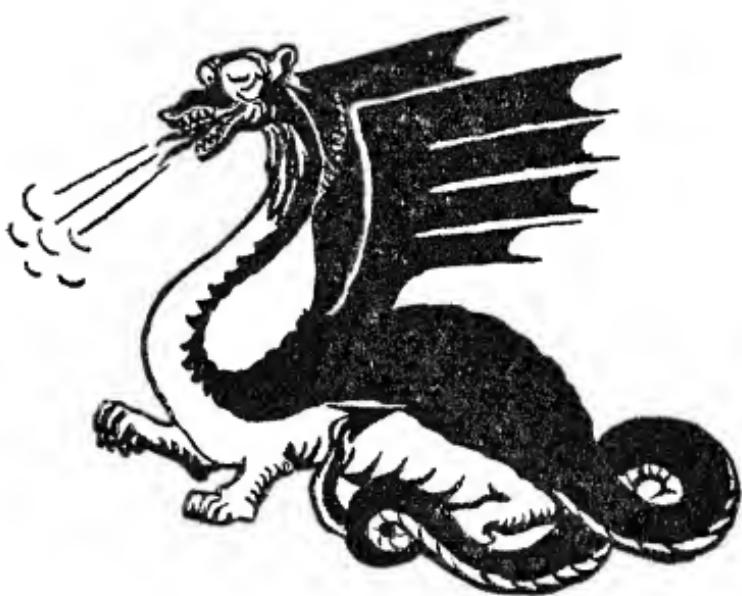
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*‘If Jones of Chelsea should be deck
With virgin’s head a horse’s neck,
And decorate this monstrous birth
With limbs of all the beasts on earth
And many-coloured wings, would you
Contain your laughter at the private view?’*

Horace, *Ars Poetica*, I-5.

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OF DRAGONS

PREFACE

I have been asked to explain the purpose of this paper. I find a ridiculous difficulty in doing so, for it had none. My interest in dragons was aroused by some incidental paragraphs in Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe*. I determined to find out all that there was to be known about dragons: with the unfailing assistance of that great institution the London Library, I made a fairly careful search; and, when I had exhausted my authorities (to whom I am greatly indebted), I set down with some pleasure the facts that had come under my notice. That is all.

In case it should be objected that no

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sane man could have done anything so elaborately purposeless, I will attempt a more plausible explanation—though the truth is exactly what I have said.

The first four sections give a fair account of the dragon as known to history: in ancient Greece, in early Christendom, and in modern Europe. The last two endeavour to explain how the dragon-story may have originated from the myths and customs of prehistoric Egypt, and how humanly foolish the whole thing is; and they close with the pious hope that the species may in time become extinct.

It will be objected that the dragon is already dead, as has been shown in the course of the paper. It is true that the living, breathing, devouring dragon has passed away with Perseus and the gods of old; we have to-day only an occasional saga, such as the Jabberwock, a pale reflection of the full-

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blooded ancient tales, lacking many essential details and almost apologized for by its author ; a herald's act of piety, or the unreal enthusiasm of an aesthete vainly seeking de-sophistication. It is all a faint after-glow of the age of faith. And yet, in England at any rate, the dragon is not dead.

What are the chief characteristics of modern Englishmen—not the ornaments of society, nor artists, nor any other lovely ones, but these poor plain people who earn their daily bread, with or without the sweat of their brows, because they must ; who make up nine-tenths of our population ; who control our political destinies ; and whom the Carlton Club delights to honour ?

They are respectability, bigotry, and cant. There can be no doubt about this. The consequence is that the men have no character and the women no

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charm, and we rule over a quarter of the world with complete satisfaction to ourselves. These three together make up our modern dragon. Respectability is the deadliest, for it is a plausible substitute for better things ; but it is a dead end, like innocence.

Most men who have realized the existence of this monster apparently try to meet it by joining the Labour Party. There is nothing immoral about that, but I pin my faith to the less dogmatic method of general education. It is curious, by the way, to note that the devil is historically associated with knowledge and not with ignorance. It would take too long to explain how this bogey came to be hoisted, but it is still very commonly made use of to frighten children, and my true purpose is to plead that it *is* only a bogey, and that ignorance is the devil's most effective weapon.

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The devil's advocate might argue much as follows :

1. " You don't really like ' the vulgar '—they are not as interesting as your own friends."
2. " It will come to nothing. What is the ultimate value of ' free discussion ' and ' reasoning without prejudice ' among people who don't read and can't think.?
3. " In so far as you do succeed, you will merely make them miserable : as thus :
 ' Happiness is the end of life.
 ' It consists of (a) the admiring contemplation of the truly admirable, and the delighted companionship of the truly delightful. This is the best.
 (b) The second best is to enjoy in imagination what you know to be imaginary.
 (c) The third best is to enjoy

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mistakenly what is in fact non-existent or ugly.

‘There is no other good.’

“All this is A B C, and no longer worth arguing about. Then imagine a man well content with a mistaken religion, a dreary home, and an unlovely wife (and this describes nearly all mankind). What happens when you educate him? It is difficult for him to change his wife, very difficult to change his religion, and impossibly difficult to change his home—and the man is uprooted and miserable for life.”

The answer is: This is all substantially true (which is the definition of caricature). Comfortable folk too commonly ignore the prosaic foundations of imperishable things. Many of the more delightful virtues are impossible vices to men struggling for the bare necessities of life (as you may see

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any day if you try to practise ordinary courtesy in mounting a 'bus), and it is complacent cant to propose such virtues to them. And men so struggling are not altogether delightful. The point about them is, by what right or merit of yours do you live so much more easily, with so many more opportunities of the good life ; and do you use your opportunities ? And can you be of any use to others less fortunate than yourself ? For the rest :

(1) The argument defends too much. It defends every *status quo* against all change. But change, though not necessarily progress, is evidently necessary to progress ; and, even if progress be despised of, change is in itself nearly always healthy. It prevents men from going to sleep.

(2) When all the world is delightful, all men will be able to enjoy delightful companionship. Meanwhile the pioneers

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must suffer, and hope for better things for their children.

If it be argued that education does not make men delightful, in fact very much the contrary, I answer that that depends upon the education, and that, if genuine education doesn't, nothing will ; which is absurd.

(3) When all the world loves lovely things, then lovely things will be easily come by, and ugly things will not be tolerated. This is not a generous illusion but a simple economic truth. Suppose I manufacture purple handkerchiefs adorned with green dragons : I do it because there is a demand, and if you want one perfectly plain (and if nobody else does) you will have to pay twice as much for it because it is a "special" ; but, if all the world wanted them plain, they would be a stock line and you could have them for half the money. Meanwhile the

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pioneers must pay double or go without.

(4) When all the world has passed through the stage of intelligent scepticism and examined its foundations, it will worship the unknown god without fear and without reproach—a very right and proper thing to do. Meanwhile the pioneers must be damned as dissenters.

That is the gist of this paper: “Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation. . .” Good (*b*) is in itself better than (*c*) ; and it is a half-way house to (*a*), which (*c*) is not.

All the text-books tell us about the nature and origin of belief. I have but shown a few examples of what incredible things men believed almost down to our own day, and still believe. One of the chief functions of History is to show what wrongs good men have tolerated, and what absurdities wise men have believed, as a warning to

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their later sons to look warily about them for the like. In that sense this paper may claim to be true history.

“That low man seeks a little thing to do,
Sees it and does it :
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,
Dies ere he knows it.
That low man goes on adding one to one,
His hundred’s soon hit :
This high man, aiming at a million,
Misses an unit.”

We "may miss an unit and die ; but at least we shall have striven to be worthy of a grammarian’s funeral.

OF DRAGONS

I

OF DRAGONS IN GENERAL

Down at Glastonbury, where St Dunstan took the devil by the nose and where the Pilgrim's Inn is dedicated to St George and the Dragon, the dragon will always be an object of peculiar interest, not to say veneration. (So true is this that on the 16th October, 1906, the Somerset County Council, on the advice of its Chairman, adopted as its sole device "Gules, a dragon rampant, or", though the recognition of its increasing importance has since led it to add—15th October, 1912—the mace of office, "at a cost not exceeding £20").

For Milton writes in one of his most harmonious numbers :

"The old Dragon under ground
In straiter limits bound
Not half so far casts his usurp'd sway,
And wroth to see his kingdom fail
Swinges the scaly horrour of his folded tail."

OF DRAGONS IN GENERAL

and St John (*Revelations*, XX, 2) speaks of "the Dragon, the old Serpent, which is the Devil and Satan", while the Serpent that tempted Eve in Paradise has been familiar to us all since our earliest childhood; though commentators differ as to whether it appeared with a virgin's head (as some say) and how it was enabled to speak, and in Eve's own language; and why the event excited no surprise in her. (Milton tells us—*Paradise Lost*, IX, 550, and what follows—that it did, and that "not unamazed" she took up the matter with the Serpent, which explained that it had been elevated above all the "other beasts that graze" by tasting of the tree of knowledge. This answer at once satisfied Eve and lured her on to her fall. The whole account is circumstantial but undocumented.) Some say that Eve was inexperienced with animals, not having been present

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when Adam named them ; Eugubinus suggests that the Serpent was a basilisk, at that time harmless ; and the Emperor Julian said roundly that the whole story was a fable. However that may be, the dragon has been identified with nearly all the gods and devils of nearly all the religions of nearly all mankind—primitive man does not distinguish between the two, both being primarily non-moral beings of enormous and terrifying power—and Christian evidence is undivided in associating the dragon with the powers of darkness. And what could be more natural than that a dragon should take up its abode in or near Glastonbury, this region of hills and swamps ? For it is universally admitted that dragons are to be found on the tops of mountains or in the depths of marshes, and it is a generally accepted test of evidence that what has been believed by all men everywhere in

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every age is true—absurd, perhaps, but not more absurd than the modern opinion that what one man has once believed is true.

We need not pause long over those other meanings of “Dragon” which so confused our forefathers and so delight our contemporary compilers of dictionaries : we do not propose to study that Dragon (Draco) who gave stringent laws to the ancient Athenians, nor the variety of carrier-pigeon known to natural history under that name, nor the star called Dragon, nor quicksilver, nor (directly) the sea-serpent, nor the flying lizard ; nor have we any concern with the dragoons, who take their name either from the dragon wrought upon their guns or from the fact that they were originally mounted infantry, and so a kind of fabulous monster or “popular mystery”. Our subject is the common (or garden) dragon, one of the

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major vertebrates, blood-red or chameleon-hued, with huge snake-coils, web-feet, bat-wings, and the head of a lion or an eagle, capable of snuffing up the wind (*Jeremiah*, XIV, 6) and holding companionship with owls (*Job*, XXX, 29) though some say that the bird intended is the ostrich. It dwelt of old in mountain-caves, and lakes and marshes, and other inaccessible places (the fiercer sort favoured the mountains), and survives to-day only in heraldry, for instance in the arms of the City of London, and of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. More peculiar and detailed descriptions of the animal will follow later, but it is well to note here its special partiality for water and for swallows (whence swallows flying low are to this day popularly supposed to herald rain), and its habit of guarding treasures—gold, pearls, and precious stones—and of emitting thunder and

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lightning. Eating its heart confers peculiar qualities, notably fertility and the gift of tongues, and the draconite or precious stone which lies embedded in its forehead has incredible properties in the way of medicine and magic, but only if you catch the animal alive and remove the stone without otherwise injuring it. (The recorded instances of this feat are remarkably rare, most authentic draconites having fortunately fallen from the head of the beast while in flight, very much as a meteorite might fall to-day).

Without further theorizing or inquiry we will pass on to the old Greek legend of Perseus, pausing only for the pleasant task of exploding one particularly absurd opinion about the origin of the dragon. Sceptics have suggested that it is nothing but primitive man's hazy and terrified tradition of the antediluvian monsters which walked the

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early earth and which adorn the first pages of Mr Wells's *Outline of History* ; but science now tells us that something like seven million years elapsed between the passing of the last of these and the first appearance of the first of our fairly human forbears.

II

OF THE DRAGON IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

There were numerous dragons in old Greece, “gorgons and hydras and chimaeras dire”, and all the best heroes had at least one apiece to their credit ; but they were a confusing and unfriendly lot, and we will confine ourselves to the central legend of Perseus.

“ An oracle warned Acrisius, King of Argos, that he would surely die by the hand of his daughter Danae’s son. To prevent this, he locked the fair maiden in a tower of brass, which he built for the purpose. But Zeus, King of Heaven, visited her in the disguise of a golden shower of rain, and, much to Acrisius’ annoyance, she bore a son, Perseus.

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Acrisius then shut them up in a chest and cast them into the sea ; but, far from being drowned or inconvenienced by the motion, the babe slumbered as in a rocking cradle, and in due course the chest was drawn safely ashore on Seriphos by Dictys, brother to Polydektes, King of that island, who took the pair under his protection. Time passed, and Polydektes sought to marry the unwilling Danae, and, to get rid of Perseus, now a strapping lad, sent him off to kill Medusa and bring home her head. Medusa was a kind of dragon called a Gorgon, who, though mortal herself, had two immortal sisters. Their parentage, though obscure, was extremely distinguished, whence their troubles ; for as half-castes they had no lot or portion with gods or men, which to three lively young women (as they then were) was insufferably dull. Their speaking countenances betrayed the

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depth of their more than human suffering, so much so that in course of time they became so terrible to look upon that any man who should see them would be turned to stone at sight. In this awkward predicament Perseus was fortunate in possessing friends in high places. The goddess Athene gave him a mirror, to strike the creature after the manner of a man shaving, without directly looking on her—an awkward and unconvincing manoeuvre. The god Hades gave him a helmet of invisibility, apparently of a higher class than the device adopted by Old Peter in the Bab Ballad. (He, you will remember, duly became invisible, but his clothes did not; whence divers inconveniences.) Or perhaps the hero travelled in primitive simplicity (but that wouldn't account for his weapons). The god Hermes gave him his own winged shoes, and the god Hephaestus a mortal blade.

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Armed with these contrivances, and luckily finding the Gorgons asleep, Perseus completed his task and started for home with the head in a travelling-bag with which he had prudently provided himself (for the head was still fatal to view). On his way he turned Atlas to stone (and you can see the Atlas mountains to this day), either out of pity for his sufferings—he had to hold up all heaven on his head, (and heaven was, as in early Christendom, completely solid)—or, as some say, in revenge for some trivial rudeness. If so, it is a regrettable blot on his otherwise unsullied escutcheon ; for even Medusa had longed to die. Flying on, he next beheld Andromeda, daughter of Cepheus king of Ethopia, bound to a rock and waiting to be devoured by a dragon. This dismal scene had been staged by Zeus to appease the Old Man of the Sea, because the king's wife had boasted

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that she (or, as some say, her daughter) was more beautiful than the nymphs of the sea. Perseus rapidly appreciated the situation, pressed the terrified damsel to marry him (about which in her distress she made no difficulty, though already betrothed to her uncle Phineus, who was safely under cover at home), killed the instrument of divine vengeance when it lumbered up clumsily from the sea, so that the waves ran red with its blood—and duly married Andromeda. The skulking uncle made a regrettable scene at the ceremony, and the bloody fight was terminated only by Perseus' producing the fatal head of Medusa, which turned his enemies to stone. Returning home with his bride, he restored his grandfather, who had been dethroned by a wicked brother, and reached Seriphos in time to save his mother from Polydektes, whom he replaced by the

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faithful Dictys. Shortly afterwards he was throwing the hammer at some sports organized by a neighbouring monarch, when his aged grandfather unluckily got in the way and received a fatal blow on the head ; and the old oracle was fulfilled. Perseus inherited his kingdom, and begot a numerous progeny ; but this idyllic scene was overshadowed by the gloom of the accident, and he found no peace until he exchanged thrones with the king of Tiryns, where he lived to a ripe old age, and died, universally lamented, in the bosom of his family.”

Such is the old Greek Legend : two dragons, a supernatural birth, supernatural weapons, faithful and wicked brothers, a rescued maiden, and the inexorable doom of Fate. We shall come back to this in our conclusion.

III

OF THE DRAGON IN EARLY CHRISTENDOM

There were numerous dragons in early Christendom, “gorgons and hydras and chimaeras dire”, and all the best saints had at least one a-piece to their credit ; but they were a confusing and unfriendly lot, and we will confine ourselves to the central legend of St George.

“ St George is one of that numerous class of Saints about whom nothing authentic is known ”: but, piecing together the *Golden Legend* and the Portuguese and Balkan variants, we arrive at the following :

“ The people of Troyan were sunk in all manner of iniquity, which greatly

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shocked Our Lady, who happened to visit the place. Returning to Heaven, she protested to God, who sent bears to frighten them into righteousness. This proved of no avail, and, on the suggestion of Elijah, God then sent them all manner of plagues and poxes for seven years, but without result ; he then sent a drought for a similar period, and, as they still remained unconverted, he created a lake in the neighbourhood and in it a dragon which visited the city three times a day and devoured three hundred inhabitants at each visit ; in addition to these "hearty meals" it demanded a virgin nightly, and at last the lot fell upon the king's daughter ; after obtaining eight days' grace for lamentation, he was finally forced to abandon her with his blessing ; but the blessed George (a child of supernatural birth, induced by his mother's eating a peculiar fish), passing by on his

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dappled courser with his mortal lance greeted her in the name of God and inquired why she was there ; after hearing her story and satisfying himself as to her faith and morals (" Had her heart always been pure ?" etc.) he dismounted and planted his lance in the earth. He then laid his head in her lap, saying : " Pray examine my head a little, for I feel strangely sleepy." Under the soothing influence of her gentle fingers he fell asleep, and the abrupt transitions of a traditional ballad do not enable us to judge whether the damsel was long occupied in removing the consequences of his saintly disregard for cleanliness ; while he rested, the lake rose in waves and the dragon emerged. The bashful maid was ashamed to waken her deliverer, but her tears rolled down upon his face and he leapt up like one possessed, and, fortified with the sign of the Cross,

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heavily wounded the dragon. "Pass thy girdle round its neck, nothing doubting (said he) and lead it into the city, and bid them be converted : if they refuse, set free the insatiable dragon and he will destroy the people of Troyan." The argument thus presented on his behalf by the Princess proved irresistible, and they were converted to the number of 20,000 excluding women and children. The fate of the dragon is uncertain, but one version tells, in some detail, how it was then killed and how four pair of oxen were required to remove it. The grateful monarch erected a Church to Our Lady and St George (whose promotion appears to have been remarkably rapid) and offered him money and his daughter to wife. ' But that holy and unambitious man replied: " Give the money to the poor, care for the Church, honour the priests, and diligently attend divine worship." As to

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the daughter, the difficulty is that George, by virtue of vows he has taken, cannot marry. At this critical moment his brother sees by a magical life-token that George is in danger, and, hurrying off, arrives in time to accommodate his tender conscience by taking the lady himself and leaving George the honours of canonization." Virtue always triumphs in Fairy-tales.

Such is the early Christian legend : A dragon, a supernatural birth, a helpful horse, a faithful brother, a life-token, and a rescued maiden ; and " the Church may be congratulated on having converted and canonized the pagan hero Perseus." But, before passing on to more modern evidence, it will be well to give some account of the popular variants which circulated all over the world as fairy-tales, superstitions, or romances, almost down to

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our own day. The point in this case is not so much who told or believed or guaranteed them, but the simple fact of their having been told.

They consist almost invariably of four incidents: the supernatural birth, the life-tokens, the helpful animals or the magic weapons, and the rescued maiden.

(The most recent I believe to be the poem on the "Jabberwock", which occurs in *Through the Looking Glass*. The hero, though evidently somebody's child ("Come to my arms, my beamish boy"), has no undoubted sire. The tum-tum tree ("So rested he by the tum-tum tree") is probably a life-token. His vorpal sword ("His vorpal blade went snicker-snack") is without doubt a magic weapon, and the "slithy toves", "mome raths", and "borogroves" may well be helpful animals. The rescued maiden is not specifically

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mentioned, but it is difficult to explain in any other way the behaviour of the monster ("manxome", "whiffling", "burbled",) or the motives of the hero).

The Supernatural Birth. "Heroes of extraordinary achievement or extraordinary qualities were necessarily of extraordinary birth. The wonder or the veneration they inspired seemed to demand that their entrance upon life, and their departure from it, should correspond with the impression left by their total career." It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that every old Oriental tale begins with the words: "There was a king who had no children", and the means adopted by them for achieving their pious purpose may be the eating of fish, fruit, barley-corns, eggs, saltpetre, or a dragon's heart. There are dangers in all these unusual methods, as in the case of the

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man who was given a male and a female fish of which his wife was to eat one according to the sex desired. Wanting a son, and to guard against accident, the rash man ate the female fish himself, "with the wholly unexpected result that he himself gave birth to a daughter". In another case the dragon's heart, while being cooked, "began to emit a pitch-black smoke so powerful in its effects that the condition not merely of the queen (who tasted the heart) but of the maiden who cooked it, as well as of every article of furniture in the room, became interesting. The old four-post bedstead gave birth to a cradle", and so on and so forth—a very economical method of furnishing. In European tales, on the other hand, "the medicine is more frequently used to gratify spite against an unfortunate maiden" by putting her unwittingly in blessed circumstances.

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In every case at least one child is born "of powers, it need hardly be said, as remarkable as his parentage". Other substances which are "sovran against barrenness" are water, wind, sun, and a magic touch.

The Life-tokens. Very commonly the hero has one or two brothers born with him in the same miraculous way, and they set out on their fortunes together. What enables them to keep in touch when they part is a magic life-token, also born with them in the same way—for instance, a tree which grows from part of the fish planted in the garden at the time that their mother ate her part. Each one of them will have such a tree or branch which thrives or withers according to his own fortunes, and by this token each knows when the other is in danger, and comes to his rescue as in the case of St George. Sometimes it is a magic mirror, in which only the

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party concerned can see the fate of his brother—"no doubt the eye of faith was required to see anything in it." By this means the brothers invariably rescue each other, or, if they come too late or if a witch has turned the unlucky one to stone, either the witch thoughtfully provides the elixir of life or she is killed and it is found among her effects, or the faithful animals find it. Safely reunited, they commonly agree upon the division of their very considerable spoils; but in some cases they fall out and one kills the other, in which case the "elixir of life" comes into play again and they all live happily ever after. It may well be that the repentant brother will see two snakes fighting: one kills the other, but in remorse brings it to life again with a magic herb: the sagacious fellow takes the hint, and all is well again.

The Helpful Animals. These are

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often begotten together with and in the same miraculous way as the heroes and the life-tokens. Arranged according to what we may now call "the Bovril principle", they come in the following order: horses, dogs, hawks, lions, wolves, falcons, bears, foxes, eagles, ants, dog-fishes, bulls, calves, hares, boars, cats, winged horses, and deer.

The Magic Weapons. These are an obviously later variant of the same idea and, on the same principle, stand in the following order: lance, shield, sword, pistol, gun, magic wand, stick, bow and arrow, knife, beer, stole, magic water, powder-horn, air-gun, iron staff, 500-lb. club, mace, and crucifix.

The Rescued Maiden. In every case the function of the hero and all his apparatus is to rescue a distressed maiden from a monster to whom she is being sacrificed to appease the Gods.

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Often the hero, having rescued the lady, “ungallantly refuses to see her home, saying that he wishes to see a little more of the world”. But, before departing, he takes some token—the dragon’s tongue or eye or other part, or the lady’s handkerchief or other ornament. His desertion leaves her a prey to the first impostor who comes along, claims the victory for himself and the lady in marriage. In the nick of time the hero returns and shows up the impostor “and poetical justice is completed by his marriage with the lady” (who has always fallen in love with him at first sight), while her sisters (for she has two sisters) are commonly given to the two other princes (for he has two brothers).

As I have said, all the best Saints performed feats of this nature, including the Holy Apostles Philip and Matthew, St Michael, St Margaret, St Hilarion,

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St Donatus, St John, St Sylvester, Pope Leo IV, and a man named Smith (at Deerhurst in Gloucestershire). It is also told of a boy who was carried off by a dragon that, after long years, he was found in its cave "alive and reading the Gospel, which was held up before him by St Friday, while St Sunday further contributed to his convenience by holding the candle."

Scarcely ten miles from Glastonbury a terrible dragon lived once on Aller Hill over beyond High Ham. His fiery breath destroyed the people and their flocks and herds, and he was particularly partial to maidens. The climax came when a young man called one morning to fetch his bride away to Church: her home

"was levelled to the ground,
And on its ruins, now a funeral pyre
Smouldered the ashes of her aged sire"

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and the foul monster had carried her off to his cave. The bridegroom swore, in his despair, that " earth should no longer hold a thing so vile ", and, marching off with his friends, killed the dragon and rescued his bride ; but the story ends on a classical note of tragedy, for she died of horror in his house that very day.

[Reference : E. Sidney Hartland,
The Legend of Perseus,
3 vols. London, 1896.]

IV

OF THE DRAGON IN MODERN EUROPE

It will be well to begin this section with short accounts of the two most satisfactory Renaissance dragons: the Dragon of Rhodes and the Dragon of Bologna.

“The history of the ancient Order of the Knights of St John (not yet removed to Malta) records that about the year 1330 Dieudonné de Gozon, afterwards third Grand Master of the Order, joined the Knights in Rhodes, and was filled with pious zeal to kill a terrible dragon which ravaged the Island; but the then Grand Master considered such extravagant gaieties too dangerous for a knight vowed to the defence of Christendom, and roundly forbade it.

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On this de Gozon returned to the castle of his ancestors near Tarascon in France, and, with the help of an ingenious dummy dragon (so little does the art of war change), trained his horses and dogs to face the monster, and, returning, killed it and removed its tongue as evidence. A lying Greek (so little does the Greek nature change) found the carcase and claimed the victory ; but de Gozon showed him up by producing the tongue—and was put in prison for disobedience. The Pfalzgraf Ottheinrich made our first written record of this feat when passing through on a pilgrimage in 1521, and the corroborative evidence is indisputable : the feat is said to have been recorded on the tombstone of the knight (we have the tombstone, and it isn't); there are said to be pictures of it in a wall-painting in a house in Rhodes (which cannot be found) ; and the family are said to have

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preserved the draconite taken by the hero from the monster's forehead (the family has disappeared) ; the head itself was seen by a seventeenth century traveller still nailed to a gate in Rhodes, though it disappeared during the last century. For countless years the simple islanders had displayed it for the glory of God and without thought of gain, and it would perhaps be uncharitable to connect its disappearance with the recent development of transatlantic transport, or with the discoveries of modern science, which have shown that the skeleton of the dun-cow at Warwick is simply that of a whale. And, finally, they will show you to this day in Rhodes the cave where the dragon lived."

The story of the Dragon of Bologna is tame by comparison. It is recorded in great detail in *The Natural History of Serpents and Dragons* by Professor

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Ulysses Aldrovandus, published at Bologna by Mark Antony Bernia in the year 1640, at his own charges, with a dedication to the Prince-Abbot Franciscus Perettus, and with the approval of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph, the Rector to the Cardinal-Archbishop of Bologna, and the legal adviser to the Most Holy Office of the Inquisition in that city.

The story is as follows (p. 402) : " In the early summer of the year 1572, to wit on the 13th of May, the dragon appeared in the outskirts of Bologna, hissing horribly. It was caught the day after Ascension Day by a cowherd called Baptista of Camaldulus, about 5 p.m. and about seven miles out from the City, on the high road. His cows saw it and stopped dead, and Baptista, who was behind with his cart, pricked them on with his goad ; but they went down on their knees and wouldn't

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budge. Then he heard a great hissing and beheld the astounding monster: but, though frightened out of his wits, he up with his stick and knocked it on the head so that it died. The brave herd, fearing it might not be dead, cut off one of its feet and brought it into Bologna as evidence. After three days the noble Horatius Fontana gave orders for the carcase to be sent to the great naturalist Aldrovandus, who declared it to be unique in all Italy and all Europe, and had it stuffed and put in the museum (whence it has unluckily disappeared). It was about this same time that the flying dragon appeared by night in the sky, and no sane man will doubt that these portents were sent in honour of Pope Gregory XIII, who took office in that year and who sported a dragon on his coat-of-arms."

This same Aldrovandus is our chief source of information on the modern

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dragon. He sets out, in due scholastico-scientific style, first the alternative meanings of the word "dragon", with a note that Virgil is very haphazard in his use of "dragon" or "serpent" for snakes in general; then the synonyms, as "syren", "leviathan", and the Hebrew *oach* (whence perhaps our word "hoax"); then size—5 to 100 cubits (we may split the difference and safely say about 50); habitation—Libya, India, Atlas, Aethiopia, Florida, etc. (with a caution that the species born of a wolf and an eagle is probably fabulous and nowhere to be found); colour—red, black, ashen, pea-green, indeed the evidence is hopelessly conflicting; description—head of a virgin or wild-boar, goose-feet or talons or hoofs (they probably vary); St Augustine confirms Herodotus' opinion that they fly; poison—more virulent in the hotter climes; jaw—some say very

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large, some say very small, some say two rows of teeth, some say three, and the number is in any case uncertain ; manners and customs—very vigilant and fond of gold (so we see why they are normally set to guard treasures), not afraid of men, and able to throw elephants with their tails : four or five, says Pliny, will twine their tails together for a long flight and so cover the distance at an incredible speed ; very fierce, but Heracleides, the philosopher, had one so tame that it followed him about like a dog ; birth—the evidence is conflicting as to whether from eggs or immediately. Remedies against their poison—red mullet applied externally or (better) internally, or (best of all) the head of a dragon skinned and applied to the bite. Capture—men of the most magnificent courage drug them with opium-seeds, so as to obtain the draconite ; a scarlet cloak and the

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appropriate incantation are effective, and an axe has been tried with success : a useful trick is to catch them when they are pre-occupied with an elephant-fight (their customary recreation), and another very good plan is to put down sulphur, which the creature eagerly gulps down and then rushing to the nearest river drinks until it bursts. (This was the device of the great Cracus, who gave his name to Cracow. It is an elaboration of the Prophet Daniel's method of dealing with Bel's dragon—that holy man's mixture, it will be remembered, itself exploded the dragon ; but the march of science and the closer study of animal-habits no doubt made Cracus' scheme seem more convincing).

The eyes are precious stones and the teeth ivory ; the fat is a sovereign remedy against poison, fever, and blear-eyes ; the spine is a great cure

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for toothache ; the gall-bladder and intestines mixed with wine effect more than was ever claimed for Colman's mustard in the bath, removing warts. It is very lucky to bury a dragon's head under the front doorstep, and the eyes make a fine poison and send away nightmares : and so on and so forth—all this less than three centuries ago.

A little later, about 1660, the learned Jesuit Kircher visited the Alps, and, though discounting many devils as due to the credulity of the peasantry, could not resist the conclusion that so horrid and inhospitable a country could only have been intended by God to harbour dragons, especially when a public notice in the Church of St Leodegarius (our old friend St Leger, the patron-saint of bookmakers ?) in Lucerne told how a man "passed some months in a cave with two dragons, who were either naturally

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amiable or were calmed by his energetic appeals to the Virgin, and finally escaped by holding on to their tails when they flew away after their period of hibernation" (History does not record whether they adopted Pliny's plan, or whether by a merciful dispensation of Providence they flew so close together that he suffered no strain).

The anonymous author of *The Golden Coast, or a Description of Guinney* (London, 1665) has little reliable information on this or any other subject. The people, he tells us, are Nigritae "from their colour, which they are so much in love with that they use to paint the Devil white"; and of the elephant, "which some call Oliphant", that "they have continual war against dragons which desire their blood because it is very cold." The book abounds in such old tales out of Pliny and Bartholomew Anglicus, and has

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all the appearance of a literary puff of the Company of Royal Adventures of England trading to Africa (est. 1662); for what honest man could have waxed so enthusiastic over that death-trap of a country, where (says he) "a man may gain an estate by a handfull of beads, and his pocket full of gold for an old hat; where a cat is a tenement and a few fox tailes a Mannor; where gold is sold for iron, and silver given for brasse and pewter?" The Company failed shortly afterwards and was replaced by the Royal African Company (1672), and this may well have been due to over-spending in the Advertising Department.

Doctor Thomas Browne, in his *Enquiries into very many received tenents, and commonly presumed truths* (London, 1686) (commonly called Browne's *Vulgar Errors*) is more modern, but, like a sensible man

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takes a middle path between scepticism and faith—thinks we cannot safely deny that there is such an animal as the basilisk ; but we are not to confuse it with the cockatrice, a mere hieroglyphical fancy, though even the cockatrice he will not declare to be impossible (he does not see how such an oddity *can* be hatched from “a cock’s egg” (*sic* : the phenomenon occurs only in a cock’s eighth year, and causes it acute discomfort) put under a toad or serpent) ; but many inventions, he says, are really “the courteous revelations of spirits”, and we must not be too cocksure of our merely human faculties.

Scheuchzer, the learned Botanist who toured the Alps in the first ten years of the eighteenth century, frankly adopted the compromise implicit in Aldrovandus—always to believe half of what he was told ; but he thought

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the dragon-stone in the museum at Lucerne entirely convincing ; for (says he) a dishonest man would not have invented so simple a story as its falling from the sky—but rather some fabulous tale about its coming from the farthest Indies ; and the stone not only cures simple haemorrhages, which ordinary jasper or marble might well do, but dysentery and fevers and all those ills of which, to judge from the advertisements in the local press, Glastonians may now rid themselves so much more simply. Item, a respectable citizen returned home one evening lately “with a swimming in the head and a marked uncertainty about the motions of his legs, and how can we doubt his word when he attributes these unprecedented phenomena to the influence of the dragon who encountered him in the forest ? ” Scheuchzer’s scientific journals were published at the expense

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of the Royal Society of London. Credible witnesses of to-day maintain that "not the vestige of a dragon is to be found, even in those wildest regions of the Alps which . . . were especially adapted for their generation". Thus do beauty and romance fade before the advance of Winter Sports and Grand Babylon Hôtels.

References : Aldrovandus, *op. cit.*
Thomas Browne, *op. cit.*
Leslie Stephen, *The Play-ground of Europe* (London, 1871).
E. Ray Lankester, *Science from an Easy Chair* (London, 1910).
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V

OF THE DRAGON IN ANCIENT
EGYPT

It is reported of Mr Winston Churchill that, being challenged one day by a Frenchman as to the remarkable uniform he was wearing, he replied in the same language that he was an Elder Brother of the Trinity. "Ah!" said the Frenchman, "that is indeed a unique distinction."

It is not so unique as might be supposed. If we could betake ourselves to the Egypt of 5,000 years ago, we should find them worshipping a Trinity of their own: Isis the all-Mother; Osiris the Son, and Horus. Isis, the forerunner of all the gods of all mankind was the goddess of fertility—goddess,

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not god, for what could be more evident than the female fact of birth, whereas male assistance went long unrecognized. The savage mother, finding herself with child, would attribute her condition not to a "common-place event which took place perhaps many months before", but to a recent thunderstorm or other striking phenomenon to which all could bear witness.

So Isis ruled alone for awhile, and then in her own inimitable fashion gave birth to the water-god Osiris; and between them in due course they produced the warrior Horus, who in the fullness of time became the avenger of Osiris, when the powers of darkness slew him.

This is the bald and essential outline of their faith. The details are extremely confusing, partly because of variants, but principally because the savage

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mind *is* so confused. “Anne’s Mother’s daughter, Mother’s Anne’s daughter”, reasons my baby; and the small boys who deliver messages round the factory find a similar difficulty in distinguishing between the Buying Department and the Sales Department. In exactly the same way the gods of old Egypt became inextricably mixed. The tale told of one is easily applied to another, and God the doer easily becomes God the done-by; while the symbol of the god will equally well pass for (say) the enemy of the god, or the weapon with which he fought. Like the old lady in the story, they “do not distinguish”. (Compare how our Arthur and the Saxon Cerdic, whom he fought at Langport, were both identified with the dragon).

After this warning, the chief events of the Egyptian Old Testament may not seem so absurd. They centre round

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“ The Destruction of Mankind ”, the original of all our myths.

The story is that Isis became angry with mankind because of their infidelity, and determined to slay them all. She set about it with a will and the earth ran red with their blood ; but, when she was near the end of her task, the other gods took pity on those who were left, and determined to thwart her. This they did by giving her some doctored beer, whereupon she became “ genially inoffensive ”—and so the remnant escaped ; and to this day their descendants generally regard beer with an almost superstitious veneration. The Flood is an obvious and world-wide variation of this theme.

The next stage is that Isis the slayer becomes Isis the slain, whose sacrifice will atone for the sins of mankind. The grandmother goddess then becomes a mere mortal, “ a beautiful and

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attractive maiden"—say a virgin: the virgin is then abandoned to her fate, and rescued by the conquering hero, and we are hot on the trail of Perseus and St George.

But, you will say, what has all this to do with dragons? It must be admitted that in Egypt, "the great breeding-place of monsters", no dragons survive in full-blown splendour; but these legends are the germ of all, and from them springs the essential dragon-conflict, the vendetta of Horus against the powers of darkness. The dragon has also been identified with Osiris the good controller of water, with Set the evil who killed him, with Isis in so far as she is confused with Osiris, and with Horus as the successor of Osiris; but we shall only become confused if we try to follow all its transformations.

We have come now to the end of all our tales, and I shall try in the last

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part of this paper to link up all the parts ; to show you how remarkably little essential change there has been in man's thinking for fifty centuries, and how "the commonplace incidents of originally prosaic stories became distorted and elaborated with corroborative detail, quite regardless of the original and often forgotten meaning."

*Reference : G. Elliot Smith, *The Evolution of the Dragon*, (London, 1920).*

VI

OF THE BIRTH AND DEATH OF THE DRAGON

The chief satisfaction which learned men appear to derive from these tales is quarrelling about their common or separate origin. The Separatists say that their resemblances merely show how very much alike men are, the world over ; the Communists that they are so very intricate and so far from obvious that they must have sprung from a common stock (*cf.* theories of Mr. W. J. Perry and Professor Elliot Smith as to the common—Egyptian—origin of militarism, mining, and many other branches of megalithic and modern 'culture'). Personally I am a Communist ; for it is a perfectly good

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principle, common to science and theology, that miracles are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. The question is, in any case, of no fundamental importance to us, but it will simplify what follows if I make my standpoint plain.

When our first fathers found themselves at large in this already ancient world, the first fact they noticed was that they were alive. Like all their descendants after them, they wisely worshipped facts, and they made a religion of fertility ; like us too, and like all those who will follow us, they knew nothing certain of the two infinities from which we come and to which we go, before birth and after death. The next fact they noticed was that other men died, though their minds shrank in horror from the fact that they too must die, and could not entertain it. They hankered after immortality, for their

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dear ones and (later) for themselves, as we hanker after it, and as our children will ; for in course of time it became a commonplace of all the world that all men must die, and this doom of the " sad-eyed race of mortal men " is the theme of pathos throughout antiquity. Their souls rebelled against the bitterness of death, and the search for the elixir of life (to renew man's youth and to give him immortality) has been " the inspiration of most of the world's great literature in every age and clime, and not only of our literature but of all our civilization ".

They worshipped life, and feared and hated death. And so they worshipped women, and the womb from which they all sprang. For good luck they carried amulets, shells especially ; and from being amulets these shells came to be worshipped as the actual source of life, were personified

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and made symbols again of the Great Mother, the giver of life. (So Aphrodite, the goddess of love, came floating in a shell on the foam of the sea to gladden the hearts of men). They noticed, too, that water was the first necessity of men and beasts and plants, and that dead men and things stiffened and withered as though the water was gone out of them ; and so they worshipped water as the principle of life, and the water-god was the second-born. Then, turning their vision further afield, they took note of the regular motions of the moon, her monthly course, and her strange connection with the tides of the sea ; and so the Great Mother became identified with the Moon. And then as they pondered they felt the greater glory of the Sun, and set him up above his mother the Moon ; but the moon long remained the personification of order and light and goodness, set

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over against chaos and darkness and evil—though in time it was the sun, or his successor-sun, who came to be regarded as the prince of light.

They hated death, and in the presence of it protested their belief that somehow, somewhere, the dead continued to live, needing all the gifts his family could bring—a primitive doctrine of immortality. And then, in the presence of corruption, they made plans to preserve the body: they burnt incense to restore the odour of life; they poured libations to replace the vital juices. They tried to infuse blood, the life-giver, (for “blood”, as we say still, “is thicker than water”) or to find some painted substitute. They hung the tomb with magic shells, that the dead might be born again. And when, after all, the body still decayed, they made statues instead for the soul to inhabit, and tried their charms on

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them ; and from the idea that statues can come to life grows the contrary idea that men can be turned to stone. The crowning triumph of their statuary was the eye, making the statue (as we say) " a living image " ; and, from the idea that the open eye means life, came the belief in the power of the eye for good or evil. To this day the neglect of the poorest grave is regarded as a more than callous crime, and there are not wanting those amongst us who shudder at the desecration of the age-old tombs of Egyptian kings.

Thus it was in the beginning. And when in process of time a wise king discovered the arts of irrigation (it may be that this discovery made him king ; or perhaps kingship originated with the discovery of the calendar, which conferred the gift of prophecy : " king " here is in any case premature), and spread fertility throughout the land,

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they worshipped him too and made him a living god, and cherished him as the soul (as it were) of their land's fertility. And when he grew old, and his powers began to wane, terror fell on them lest their fortunes should fail with him and they be all dead men. So they transferred their worship from the king to his office, killed him, and made his son divine. And, when he too began to age, they killed him in turn, and his sons after him, so that they always had a young and vigorous king-god. Until in time an ageing king refused to submit, and this was the origin of the story of the wrath of the Gods and the destruction of mankind. Time passed, and the monarch was replaced by a maiden among his subjects, and we are at the stage of ordinary human sacrifice, "human blood being thought of as the only elixir". But in time that, too, was ended, by

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a kind of religious reformation, through the belief that any other blood would do as well ; and this was the origin of the story of the rescued maiden and her deliverer.

They worshipped water, and they worshipped shells, and so the pearl within the oyster-shell ; and, diving for pearls, their natural enemy was the shark, the guardian of the treasure and the only true and original dragon. But in the course of ages all this was naturally forgotten, and the dragon came to be adorned with all the terrors of all the monsters of travellers' tales, from the python to the octopus and the lion that lives in the waste. Any terrible or impressive fact of life or nature—the existence of evil, or of hoary mountains—gave rise to a fresh dragon-tale ; and the fact was then brought in as evidence of the truth of the tale, very much as a politician

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to-day will convince men of his general veracity and wisdom by stating some obvious truth ; and, in the absence of facts, the vague terrors of untutored minds became embodied in similar monsters ; and so in a sense they are still, though now-a-days we call the result a complex.

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I would not wish man rid of the dragon as death ; partly, no doubt, because I know it to be impossible (" This business of death is a plain case and admits no controversy ") ; partly because death is such a satisfactory thing : it is always something to look forward to. Death is perhaps the oldest of the dragons, long since domesticated and become the friend of man through familiarity.

But there remains that other dragon of which we spoke in the beginning, compounded of respectability and bigotry and cant ; or rather these things are the evidence that the dragon still exists, for they are all the effects

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of terror: terror of truth and knowledge and hard fact, the old terror of man "a stranger and afraid, in a world he never made". This monster dwells not in the desert places of the earth, but in the hearth and home of every man. Its appetite is enormous and its destructive powers are equalled only by its fertility. Like all the other dragons, it is begotten by dogma out of ignorance.

It would be a mistake to suppose (as some have done) that religion is altogether a bad thing because it has fostered many errors, or altogether a fraud because it is profitable to priests. Every science under the sun has fostered innumerable errors, and every doctor on earth practises pious frauds daily, seldom solely for his private ends. Mankind as a whole has had a hand in these ~~imaginings~~ for half-a-hundred centuries; our certain knowledge of

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our surroundings is to this day infinitesimal ; and " it is part of our human make-up to bridge the gaps in our experience with rumours, with conjectures, and with soothing traditions ".

Not many months ago there came to these shores a Chinese game Mah Jongg, so perfected in the course of centuries that not even a Chinaman can cheat at it. Is it too much to hope that with the general increase of knowledge and the general recognition of the limits to which our knowledge can attain this old world may yet produce some saint or hero who will finally rescue Andromeda from the dragon ?



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